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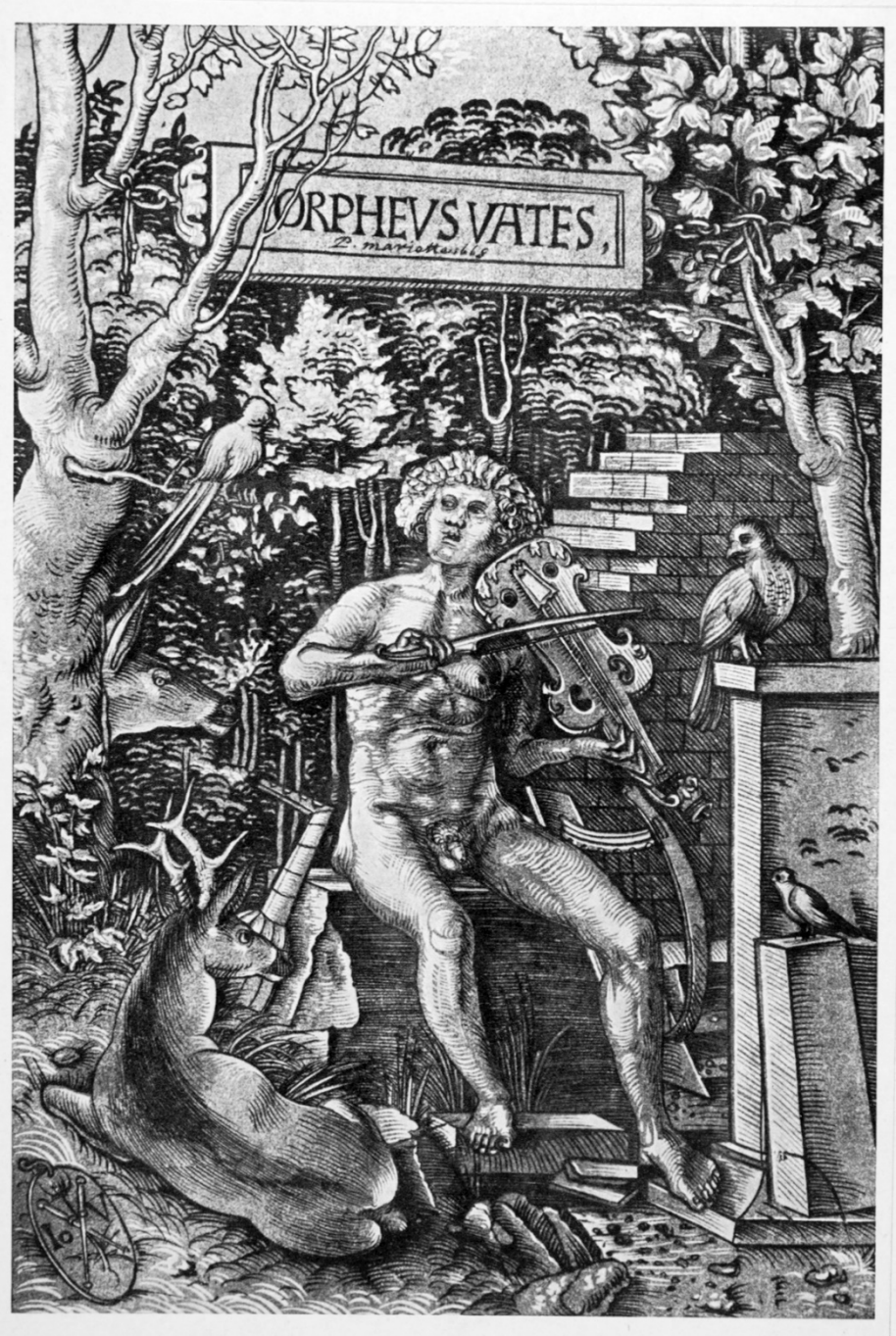

July 2014

Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age* [Book review], by Vlad Ionescu

Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age. Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012.

A fundamental lesson that the Austrian art historian Aloïs Riegl taught us is that the reception of artworks changes through time because the sensibility of the viewer is also subject to a constant modification. Writing at the turn of the century, Riegl referred to art historical styles that were judged as decadent, like the Baroque. Art history becomes the history of looking at images as opposed to their iconographic explanation. Decades after Riegl, Paul Valéry wrote in his *Cahiers* that one has to approach the artwork not only from the perspective of its reception but also by tracing its *making*. Without referring to Riegl or Valéry, Foster reminds us that a pertinent discussion of Pop Art requires a description of both its spectator and its visual structure. In this sense, *The First-Pop Age* is an in-depth portrait of both the *making of* Pop Art and of its corresponding *subjectivity*. Foster structures his book into five chapters that correspond to the five iconic Pop artists: Richard Hamilton, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter and Ed Ruscha. While there are various monographs on these five iconic artists, the value of the recent publication consists mainly in the balanced combination of its twofold agenda: on the one hand, the book offers a subtle formal analysis of visual vocabulary that these five artists developed (6). On the other hand, the book is also an inquiry into the critical aspect of Pop Art and its ambiguous relation to the mass culture. (13).

Each artist is associated with a distinctive type of image. Richard Hamilton represents the "tabular image" in the sense that he correlates different media and manipulates objects in order to create a specific optical and emotional effect (52). The banal objects of use (fragmented, reified) and words (repeated, enhanced) are significant because they

constitute a common field of perception in the consumerist society. The Pop image exposes them as icons filled with ambiguities. In *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960), Reynard Banham had already formulated an alternative to the modernism of Le Corbusier and Gropius for whom the machine was the criterion of design because its form followed its function. The alternative was the 'imaging of technology' as more effective strategy because of the machine's 'affective power, its mythic force' (21). The machine, the objects of use fascinate not only because of what they do but also because of the series of images that mediate them. Hal Foster discusses this optical appeal where 'erotization and reification are folded into each other' (34). He emphasises the ambiguity of the Pop image that, on the one hand, complies with consumerism but, on the other hand, displays the ocular grasp that the objects of consumerism exercise on the viewer. There is a critical distance in this combination of 'epiphanic presentness and everyday distraction' (59). Other than the autonomous subject described by Fried and Greenberg, the subject of the Pop image is carried by a structure of desire and perceptual distraction. The images of Hamilton problematize this structure of desire and confront the spectator with a combination of presence and distraction.

The work of Roy Lichtenstein is depicted as a strategy of mediating the 'cliché image' of the mass media. Foster emphasises the making of Lichtenstein's images and shows how the manual and the mechanic become indistinguishable in their fabrication (67). Lichtenstein was wrongfully criticised for depicting banal objects because his images do something else: they mediate these banal objects that are perceived in the mass culture and display their immediate and aggressive impact. Lichtenstein seems to suggest that all stable form - from high to low culture - has the potential to become a 'cliché image'. The agitated tempo of commercial images trains us so that we are distracted and, at the same time, develop a 'visual acuity'. In this context, to 'Lichtensteinize' becomes a trademark technique: it means to turn a cliché into a Lichtenstein painting (and thus bracket the subjectivity of the artist) while paradoxically marking his 'authorial presence' (104). Lichtenstein's paintings must not be seen as banal mimetic presentations but as confrontational images that have the inverse effect

of *'dis*identification' (101). The painting images the affective and effective demand that the popular culture impose on our sensibility. Contemplating becomes scanning and affective interiority becomes superficial melodrama.

Whereas Lichtenstein and Hamilton still continued the traditional pictorial aesthetics where the unity of perception was central, Andy Warhol questioned the composition of the picture and the reception of the spectator. His is the 'distressed image' due to the repetitive layers that both defend oneself from the traumatic event and produce it. Again, Foster delineates the making and the careful perception of these images where a *punctum* is distinguished in the manipulation of the Warholian repetitions. He investigates their optically overwhelming effect on the spectator as in the 'pulsatile webs' of the *Yarn* paintings (143). These images anaesthetise the viewer because of their power to subordinate the spectator to the operators of mechanical repetition. Other than old icons and portraits that people revere, the celebrities and the products that the Warhol images depict are consumed with an increasing velocity. The ego ideal for which they provide the prototype is not reflected but used and abused in a flux of desire whose speed justifies the process of identification, that is, the process of consumption. Warhol seems to give in to this process but he also interiorizes it to such an extent that his images expose the compulsive automatism of a time 'out of joint'.

Gerhard Richter cultivates the intuition of Kracauer according to whom the modern world desires to be immersed into the 'spatial continuum which yields to snapshots' (189). Richter feeds on the Warholian exploitation of the banal objects but also elaborates a refined painting technique. This is not a contradiction but the manipulation of a tension. How to explain the 'painterly' opticality (as Foster would not write) that engulfs these banal objects or historical figures (as in the *October 18, 1977* series)? The blurs image the speed of the distracted viewer, the memory fading away or the memory that is adjusted to the photographed world. These paintings are not blurred as opposed to the clear focus of the camera because they are not meant to be compared to the objects that they depict. The blur presents a 'third thing', an

intensification of vision that escapes the mechanical codification. On an affective level, whereas the photograph registers the trauma, the painterly opticality of the tableau mourns over it. And Foster discusses the notion of 'semblance' (*Schein*) as a modality of an appearance that is mediated either by light or by the media. The semblance has to be made because while the camera only sees, Richter's ambition is to transfer the light that the camera register and suspend it, reveal and apprehend it (201). Due to this correlation of light and photography, Foster designates the work of Richter as the 'photogenic image'.

Finally, Ed Ruscha is associated to the 'deadpan' image, a term that connotes an ironic stance masked as a lack of expression. Foster does justice to the intricate and stupefying effects of Roscha's paintings that make visible words and onomatopoeias that sometimes receive an architectural allure (as in *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights*, 1962 or *Standard Station*, 1966). There is a tension between reading and seeing, an irreconcilable difference that Lyotard denominated as the difference between the figural and the discursive (a reference that might have been pertinent). Foster refers to the reified 'commons' that are open to all of us as if the sensible is divided (to use Rancière's intuition) in words and iconic labels. Yet again, the commodification that Ruscha's images presents has ambivalent effects: it can stifle the words and objects that become mere signs but it can also animate them when they become landscapes and personages. The blasé attitude, reification and the dialectics of attention and distraction structure Ruscha's work (237). We wonder whether 'attention' is the right notion in the context of Pop art. This is a notion that has been employed in the context of the classical tableau, like the group portrait. Should we not describe the Pop image in terms of 'fascination', considering its etymological root - *fascinare* and *fari* - that combines enchantment and speaking? Ruscha's 'deadpan image' closes an epoch, presenting America as an empty façade and the future is bleak. The last phrase of the chapter is surprising: it is as if the reader witnessed a narrative whose diegetic continuity developed from a moderato prelude into a melancholic finale.

The First Age of Pop is a crucial study because of the critical audacity with which Foster accounts for the ambivalences involved in this art historical style. Can one speak of consumerist complicity or social criticism in the case of the Pop image? The answer is ambivalent yet not ambiguous: the Pop image exploits ambivalence in order to encourage a critical attitude. Pop art problematizes the spectator's relation to the high and to the low culture while maintaining a 'critical consciousness' (250). The delight of Pop with the mass culture is intermittent because it is meant to 'de-reify' the clichés by 'defamiliarizing', 'deautomatizing' (Ruscha) or by 'exacerbating and exploding' them (Lichtenstein, 251). The repetition of a prefix ('de-') connotes the strategies of intensification and reversal that are essential to Pop Art. Along these lines, the critical function of art does not consist in a dogmatic position-taking but in the subtle elaboration of visual differences. Imaging strategies that escape the regularity of the paradigm through the neutral, the repetition and the deadpan, the distracted and the cliché. The spectator of Pop art is not the consumer of the celebrities and goods that are identified on the surface of these images. To the contrary, Pop art requires a spectator that is sensible to the irregularities and discontinuities that the Pop image manipulates. Foster's book is a fascinating exploration of these visual irregularities and discontinuities that, quite contrary to the distracted gaze of the consumerist subject, demand a considerable amount of attention.